1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929) 1937
OI 17 Murngin OI 17

CHAPTER I

THE MURNGIN

The northern shores of Australia are separated in the east from New Guinea by the Torres Strait and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and in the west by the shallow Sea of Arafura. The Indian Ocean lies between Australia and the East Indian island of Timor. Below the Arafura is Arnhem Land, that almost blank space on the map which extends from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Indian Ocean. In the furthermost northern and eastern parts of this latter region are several tribes which may be referred to collectively as the Murngin. Their ancestors lived here many hundreds and probably thousands of years before them.[1]

Eastern and northern Arnhem Land are unpopulated by whites except for a half dozen or more missionaries who are stationed at three comparatively recent Christian outposts. Traders infrequently sail their two-masted luggers into the shallow harbors and mouths of the tidal rivers to exchange their goods with the natives; all other economic efforts have been unprofitable. On the southern borders of this huge territory white civilization is making a melancholy and profitless effort to implant its own markings in the form of cattle ranches on the bleak country that lies along the southern banks of the Roper River. A telegraph system which unites white Australia with the rest of the British Empire stretches from the populous cities of southern Australia across the barren central desert into the western border of Arnhem Land and terminates at the tiny, isolated town of Port Darwin.

The Murngin live some ten to fifteen degrees south of the equator in a land which has little elevation. The climate is tropical and marked by the sharp, seasonal cycles of the rainy and dry periods, with corresponding changes in the prevailing winds or monsoons. The long flat coastal regions have a savanna type of vegetation, with the ubiquitous mangrove here and there forming dense jungle groves along the flat sandy islands, bays, and tidal rivers. The groves of ti trees in this region are green oases which the native sees as he journeys in from the barren

[1] See Appendix I, Social Change in North Australia.

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132 In the rainy season great torrents of tropical rain fall daily, making
312 large portions of the mainland south of the Arafura Sea, for weeks and sometimes months at a time, a series of islands in a shallow sea of mud and water. Then, with rare interruptions, there is continuous drought for six or seven months. During the wet season tropical vege-
[137] tation has sprung up everywhere; giant spear grass sometimes grows to twelve and fourteen feet in height, covering all the country and paths, making communication a difficult matter at best, and in many places impossible. The water recedes, the water holes become drier and drier, and a large number disappear entirely; birds and fish are gone, and the many varieties of lilies and yams disappear. It is then that the native appreciates the value of water, just as before he realized the harm it could do him. It is doubtful if anyone ever died of thirst in this country, but it is certain that many have felt its pangs. Deaths have occurred from the great floods. It is small wonder that with the food
[823] and drink of life dependent on the water holes, and possible death resulting from the great floods, the native has made water his chief symbol of the clan's spiritual life.

312 The water hole may be an ordinary small lake or billibong, a river
778 or creek flooding through the domain of the clan, a spring of water, or a native well or water hole; and in a few cases it may be the ocean itself, but this last form is usually associated with a tidal spring.* All the water holes found in the territory of a clan are divided into two classes: they are either garma wells or narra (ranga) wells. The first are totemic but not sacred; they were made by the lower order of totems, whose emblems may be displayed in camp and seen by the women. The narra wells are always sacred; they were made by the higher wongar totems, whose emblems are ranga (higher emblems) and can be seen only by the initiated young men after the age of puberty. A clan always has at least one and sometimes three or four of the latter.

778 The narra water hole is usually not taboo to women. They may
[562] obtain water there, bathe in the pool, and possibly fish or gather yams and lily bulbs. Occasionally a well becomes so taboo that no woman is allowed near it. Such is the great well, Mir-rir-min-a, of the

[192] *The following native terms are used: a water hole or well, mang-o-tji (literally, eye); a spring, mil-min-jerk; river, man-i (literally, throat); creek, par-ka; a small rill running from a spring or artesian well, ri-el-la; billibong, lum-mi (upper thigh); rock-basin water, gar-ra (rain) nar-ku-la (water); fresh-water bog, mar-a-ka; saline but drinkable bog water, gal-la-min-dir; the ocean, or salt spring, or any salt water which is undrinkable, ka-pu mon-ok (water salt).

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The Wawilak Configuration and the Seasonal Cycle

821 Throughout the native interpretation in which the Wawilak myth
773 and the four rituals are connected point by point and integrated, there is a continual association of the rain and flood with the python which gives us a clue to the wider meaning of the python symbol to the Murngin. The Murngin definitely associate the Wawilak python with the weather and seasonal change. The climatic ideas which surround the python are not latent but conscious and manifest in Murngin thinking. Here we shall examine the python as a weather symbol.

132 The outstanding general natural phenomena are the great seasonal changes which produce heavy rainfall and floods for five months, and for seven months an extremely dry season in which there is no rain and many of the streams, lakes, water holes and inlets dry up. Correlated with this cycle of rainy and dry seasons are the attendant phenomena of changing winds and clouds, greater and less heat, growth and decay of vegetation, birth and growth of the different species of animals, and the appearance of certain birds and insects and the disappearance of others. There is constant need of drastic change in the adaptation of the Murngin economics and technology to fit the constantly changing natural environment.

133 The other fundamental natural phenomenon which is always dramatically before one's eyes is the relation of the land to the ocean, tidal lakes, and rivers. The great tides pour inland for scores of miles, reaching into the flat coastal plains which stretch back to the broken and difficult highlands in the interior. The flat coast land is continuous along the Sea of Arafura and the Gulf of Carpentaria.

823 The Murngin have a most accurate knowledge of the locational, seasonal, and daily variation of the tides. Anyone who has taken a canoe trip with them along the seacoast quickly learns that this knowledge is immense in detail, well organized, and held by all the men. To the Murngin mind the flow of the tide into the Murngin land stands in opposition to the flow of the rivers, particularly at flood time during the rainy season. The reason is obvious when we realize the great heights of the incoming tide and the tremendous flow of flood water which goes to the sea during the rainy season.

133 The central plain which extends from thirty-five to sixty miles in-
134 land at sea level is composed of Tertiary deposits which have produced a very poor soil. Inland the altitude increases from several hundred to a thousand feet. Arnhem Land's highest point (to the west and
000 south of the Murngin) is said to be only 1500 feet high. Because of

1; Warner E-5 (1926-1929) 1937
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Because of
the combination of heavy drought and poor soil, the coastal plain of 137
northeast Arnhem Land has hardly any jungles except patches of mangrove and palms, and is unlike New Guinea and other tropical areas of heavy rainfall in its vegetation. The vegetation has created monsoon or savannah forests which are found throughout the watered parts of the area except where soil erosion has created salt deposits which prevent tree growth. The characteristic trees are many species of eucalyptus, mangrove, acacia, ti trees, pandanus and cabbage palms. The whole country in the proper season is buried in a luxuriant growth of spear grass which grows at times to heights of ten to twelve feet.

The rainy period begins approximately in November and ends in 132
March, although heavy thundershowers and oppressive heat start in October and are also found in March and April after the heavy-rain period has passed. The dry season of five to seven months is one of drought and there is usually no rain at all from May through September, and very little in April and October. The rains belong to one type, since they are all caused by the monsoon Low coming from the northwest. The months of maximum rain are January and February. Although the rain comes from the northwest, it moves from the west more than from the north.[2]

[2] Taylor, Griffith, *Australian Environment Memoir No. 1*, Commonwealth of Australia, page 69. To avoid all possibility of including my own or Murngin preconceptions, there is given below, in preference to my own summary, the summary of a statement by Griffith Taylor (one of the foremost authorities on Australian climate and geography) on North Australian meteorological phenomena. His description is purely from the point of view of a scientific geographer.

The yearly rainfall ranges around fifty to sixty inches, but since most of this occurs in two or three months it does not give a true picture of the amount of rain that falls daily during this short period. In January and February some fifteen inches are precipitated monthly, and in December and March ten to eleven monthly. The following chart gives some idea of the rapid rise and fall of the rain from a little over two inches in October to some ten inches in December and fifteen in January, and the almost as rapid drop when the rainy season ceases. The following account of the seasonal change in Darwin (taken from Taylor's *Australian Environment*, page 70) describes very adequately the dry and rainy cycle as it is found in the Murngin country of northeastern Arnhem Land.

"The different changes of these seasons are so uniform and regular that they may be predicted almost to a day. Signs of the approach of the wet season appear immediately after the sun has crossed the equator during the spring equinox, in September, when the strong E.S.E. monsoon—which has been blowing continually throughout the dry season—ceases, and is succeeded by calms, and light, variable winds; the weather becomes intensely hot, and small thunderclouds gather over the land, increasing in size and density day by day until they burst into terrific thunderstorms, accompanied by hurricane squalls of wind and rain. These squalls, at first, take place every four or five days, gradually increasing in numbers until the end of November, when they occur

1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929)1937
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● 132 The Wawilak myth among other things symbolizes[3] the cycle of
173 the rainy and dry seasons. Evidence will be presented to show that the
82/ great python is the rainy season and that associated with this symbol

[132]

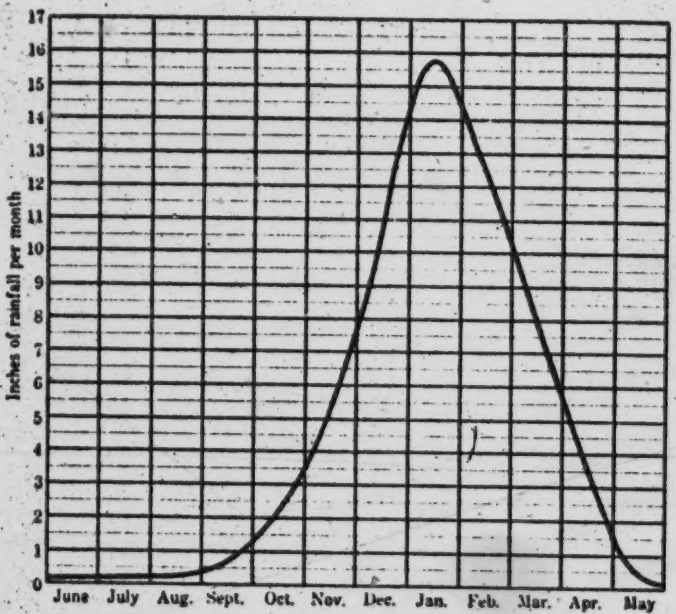

CHART XI.—RAIN CHART FOR PORT DARWIN (46-YEAR RECORD).

almost daily. They come up in a dense black bank, and travel so very rapidly that they are generally out of sight on the western horizon within 40 minutes. About an inch, or sometimes more, of heavy driving rain accompanies each storm; but in the year 1871 the writer of this article saw 2¼ inches of rain gauged within ten minutes during one of these squalls.

"During December the N.W. monsoon gradually gains the ascendancy and blows steadily, with an occasional break of calm weather. The thunderstorms disappear, the sky becomes overcast and clouded, and the atmosphere gets thoroughly saturated with moisture—so much so that leather-work becomes green with mildew; if not constantly attended to, the binding of books becomes soft; and sugar or salt, if exposed in an open vessel, will soon liquefy. This is felt to be an agreeable change after the intensely hot weather during the change of the monsoon in October and November; and, although the humid, moist atmosphere induces profuse perspiration, the effects of the weather are not nearly so unpleasant or severe as those attending the dry heat experienced in the southern portion of Australia during the same and two succeeding months.

"The N.W. monsoon is accompanied by rain almost daily, and increases in force until the latter end of January or beginning of February, when it is blowing in full heart, and penetrates with its copious and fertilizing showers into the very centre of Australia. During this period thick, damp weather prevails, the clouds being very low, and scud and banks of nimbus pass over almost constantly from the N.W. to the S.E.

1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929) 1937
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is the belief in an original flood which covered the earth and, to the Murngin, was a prototype of the modern great floods that yearly inundate the countries of their clans and force them for their own safety into the high grounds, and at times even into the trees on the high grounds.

The west and northwest wind (rainy season winds) is called Barra. "Barra is Dua, it belongs to the same moiety as the snake and is sent by the snake," said the leader of one of the Dua clans to me. In other accounts it is said to be the snake. "Barra wind only brings nothing but rain and flood. After awhile that rain brings fish in the lakes and rivers and makes the grass grow up for bandicoot to eat and the tree flowers for flying-fox and opossum and plenty of fresh tucker [vegetable food] for black men. When the stringy bark comes it is Dua time."

The west wind brings grass and flood and holds until the trees flower, when the wind changes and comes from the north. Then all the people start looking for bush tucker, and, to continue with the native comment, "Dua rain and wind bring the wet season [mai-elng-nga, no-food time]. The west-wind part is first and it is the largest part."

The dry-season monsoon comes from the southeast, and for the natives northwest of those on the Gulf of Carpentaria, it is a land wind. The dry season is called Gu-tjer-a, and the southeast wind is known as Di-mur-u. "That Dimuru brings plenty tucker and yam and other bush food. There is plenty of fish in the billibongs and plenty sea birds' eggs and yams and all kinds of plums. When the plums finish the wind goes back to Barra [northwest monsoon]. The rain

with great rapidity. The maximum temperature in the shade during the day in this weather is 96°, and the minimum during the night is 65°.

"On the approach of the autumn equinox the N.W. monsoon gradually dies away, and is succeeded by the calms, variable winds, thunderstorms, and oppressive weather until about the end of April, when cooler weather is felt; the S.E. monsoon sets in, and the dry season may be said to have fairly commenced. The wind is characterized by a clear sky, enjoyable weather, heavy dews, and cold mornings and nights—so much so that blankets can be used when sleeping. It blows off the coast without intermission, and with great force, almost throughout the season, being in full heart between June and July. At Port Darwin and other places adjacent to the coast, the monsoon generally drops in the afternoon, and is sometimes succeeded by a sea breeze, which is merely local, and only extends to a few miles inland. The atmosphere is clear and dry, and rather hot during the middle of the day—the maximum temperature in the day being 89° and the minimum during the night 56°."

[3] See social organization, technology and the various rituals which are connected with this myth.

3; Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 OU7 Muragia OU7

behind us a fresh-water swamp, shaded by large trees, fringed with luxuriant grasses and intersected with a stream of clear water. The weather, too, was at its best. The mists of morning gave way to warm dry days, while the nights were chilly and refreshing. As we sat at meals we could look across the tumbling waters and watch the aboriginal children at play, shooting the breakers in their small canoes, spearing fish, or drawing pictures in the glistening sands.

The day after reaching Yirrkalla, we received a pleasant surprise in the form of a visit from the American Consul for South Australia, Mr E. Seibert, who had made the journey to see his American colleagues; the Administrator for the Northern Territory, Mr A. R. Driver; and the Director-General of Information, Mr Kevin Murphy.

The only change of staff happened at Yirrkalla. Gordon, the transport officer, returned to Adelaide because of sickness in his family. Bray became transport officer and the position as cook was filled by Reginald Hollow.

We had no sooner settled in our camp than the Northern Territory patrol launch *Kuru* visited us. With it came W. E. Harney to act as guide to the expedition. Harney's knowledge of Arnhem Land, especially of the Gulf of Carpentaria, is extensive; of the aboriginal people, deep and understanding; and of the fauna and flora, considerable. As a story-teller and singer, Harney entertained us, individually and collectively, for hours with his tales of cattle thieves, droving and journeys with the aborigines. Merely stopping to pick up Miss McArthur, Miller, Setzler, McCarthy and Harney, the *Kuru* continued her journey to Port Bradshaw, where Setzler dug out more Malay graves, Miller caught fish by line, poison and net, and McCarthy and Harney examined a small group of cave paintings at Jelangbara. Miss McArthur had asked to be allowed to establish a nutrition camp, with no other companions but her two aboriginal interpreters, a man and his wife, claiming that she could get a truer picture of the aborigines in their natural environment if she were by herself.

On the return of the party from Port Bradshaw, Setzler and McCarthy flew to Milingimbi to carry out archaeological research, whilst the remainder of the scientists concentrated on their own special interests near the base camp. During this time, the botanist, mammalogist, ornithologist, and particularly the ichthyologist added greatly to their collections. Billington and Hodges set up their nutrition laboratory in the mission hospital, a much more comfortable place for work than Umbakumba. Bassett-Smith and I photographed many aspects of aboriginal life on colour cine film. The aboriginal men also produced for me many unusual bark paintings as well as carved and painted figures.

But again sea transport troubles arose. During the period of the Yirrkalla camp I had flown into Darwin and arranged with some Chinese merchants to send their forty-ton landing barge *Triumph* to Yirrkalla, load all the gear and, with members of the party aboard, take the barge around the north coast and up the East Alligator River to our next camp at Oenpelli, a journey of about six hundred miles. Although the journey would not have been comfortable, this

3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 OI17 Murngin OI17

along the bottom of the lagoon. Panel *b* deals with the time when the wet-season floods submerged a hive of wild bees near the totemic place of the tortoise. Many of the bees were drowned and both they and the honey floated on the surface of the water. The dots represent the drowned bees, and the diamonds the honey from the submerged hive. The patterns on panels *c* and *d* are the leaves of the spike-rush, *norik* or *rakia*.

The parallel white lines on *e* symbolize the fish trap constructed by *Laitjun*,[40] a type of trap still employed to capture a fresh-water fish called *paipinja*.

(5) Fish

The Shark, Mana, at Blue Mud Bay

When the *dua* shark, *Mana* (tiger shark, *Galeocerdo* sp.) was a man he tried to establish a camp at Arnhem Bay, but was speared by *Borolo-borolo*[41] because the latter did not want any strangers near him. *Mana* ran across country to Blue Mud Bay, transformed himself into a tiger shark and tried to live in a fresh-water swamp. But it was far too shallow for his comfort, so he travelled to the sea coast, where he met an old man tiger shark with whom he has lived ever since.

Mana's body is now a large white-barked eucalyptus tree in the swamp where he first tried to live. *Mana* the shark continues to live in the sea. This apparent contradiction is not unusual, p. 33. A carved figure, Pl. 132A, illustrates this myth.

Plate 119B pictures the totemic swamp of *Mana*, near Blue Mud Bay.* At *a* is the tiger shark, *Mana*, and at *b* his companion. The wavy lines at their tails symbolize the wake.[42] In the upper and lower panels, the squares[43] on either side of the sharks indicate the fallen leaves of an unidentified palm tree floating on the surface of the water.[44] At certain times of the year the aborigines make a fish trap by blocking the entrance of a watercourse leading into the swamp with these leaves, and driving the fish into it.

Turtles and Fish

Plate 119C depicts the ocean.[45] The upper and lower left-hand panels *a* and *b* show two *dua* green turtles, *gurinu*, in the rough water indicated by the groups of curving lines. On the lower right at *c* are two seagulls, *nurula*, in flight, two dolphins, *injapana*, and two conch-shells. The cross-hatched object on the left of this panel is a trepang. Above this group at *d* is an attempt to depict a water-spout, *bojunga*. These are not uncommon in the Gulf of Carpentaria during the monsoon season. On the upper right at *e* are two fish, and two turtles eating sea-urchins. The groups of curving lines indicate rough water.

40. Engraved pipe, Fig. 60D. 41. See bark painting of *Borolo-borolo*, Pl. 110A.
* Reproduced in *Australia: Aboriginal Paintings—Arnhem Land*, 1954, Pl. XVIII.
42. This symbol is often used in the art of north-eastern Arnhem Land, e.g. Pl. 115C.
43. These symbols are used on carved figure of the shark, *mana*, Pl. 132A, B, C.
44. The *mata* design of the *dua djapu*, language group, of Blue Mud Bay, Fig. 64A.
45. Interpretation by F. D. McCarthy.

another yam, *banumin*. But each woman became so engrossed in her own dance that she forgot about the other, and travelled in a different direction from that of her companion. *Bunbulama* finished her dance at Melville Bay where, in company with her husband, *W'uluwait*,[58] they now entertain the spirits of *dua* dead whilst they are on their way to Purelko.[59] *Muralunangau*, on the other hand, danced her way to Bremer Island. But when *Muralunangau* was making camp she noticed the flowers with which she had decorated herself had all wilted. She became so sad and wept so violently that the sound of her grief caused the *timaru* wind to blow.[60]

At the present time, when the rainy season is nearing its end the women in the camp wail in unison, believing that the sound of their grief, like that of *Muralunangau*, will cause the wet-season wind, *barn*, to stop and the *timaru* wind to blow.[61]

The white cap on the head of *Muralunangau*, Pl. 136B, D, indicates the paint used when she decorated herself in readiness for her dance with *Bunbulama*. The yellow face on Pl. 136D is symbolic of the colour of the totemic clay-pan of the woman at Bremer Island. The black rectangle at *a*, Pl. 136B, is *Muralunangau's* carrying-bag. The cross-hatched panels on *Muralunangau's* body indicate falling rain.[62]

The Winds of Yirrkalla. Barn is a north-westerly *dua* wind which continues throughout the rainy season, extending from November to March. This is a time of scarcity for the aborigines, because the continuous rains, high humidity and heavy storms not only spoil most of the food, but prevent fishing.

Timaru, another *dua* wind, blows from the east-south-east and immediately succeeds the *barn*. The plants start to bear fruit and the underground tubers to mature during the period of this wind. The mythical woman, *Muralunangau*, of Bremer Island was responsible for the first *timaru* wind.[63] As mentioned previously, the aboriginal women endeavour to start the *timaru* wind by means of concerted wailing.

The *jiritja* wind, *lunguruma*, which blows from a northerly direction, is sent to the aborigines of Yirrkalla by the spirits of the *jiritja* 'heaven', Nalkuma. *Lunguruma* brings many coco-nuts, lengths of bamboo and sometimes even Melanesian canoes;[64] all of these are looked upon by the Yirrkalla aborigines as gifts from the spirits of Nalkuma.[65] Food is plentiful during the period of this wind.

58. See myth associated with bark figure of *Bunbulama*, Pl. 65C, D.
59. See myth, journey of *dua* dead, p. 325. 60. See details of Groote Eylandt winds, p. 91.
61. The *timaru* is the wind following the wet season, a time of scarcity. It ushers in a period when the fruits start to ripen and the underground tubers mature.
62. As there is no mention of rain in the myth of *Muralunangau* it is not clear why these designs are painted on her body.
63. See myth of woman, *Muralunangau*, p. 433. 64. See carved pipe, p. 308.
65. Berndt (1948), p. 91, mentions that 'at the time of the north-east winds [no doubt *lunguruma*], just after the wet monsoonal season, coco-nuts, canes, hog pods, bread fruit and timber, with an occasional canoe (including some of the outrigger variety) are washed up on the mainland beaches and are said to have been sent by the spirits that inhabit Badu.' Berndt's Badu is my Nalkuma.

3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 O117 Murngin O117

Mamarika[66] (*jiritja*), from the south-east, the major wind of the dry season, is not, during its early stages, a time of plenty. Towards its close, however, the cycad fruit, *natu*, ripens and provides the aborigines with ample food.

Following the *mamarika* is the *tjeleton*, a *jiritja* wind of short duration which blows first from the north-east, changing to the north-westerly *bara*. The cycad fruit is plentiful during this period.

Several other winds of short duration are recognized by the men of Yirrkalla—*djala* (southerly), *jauara* (south-west), and *ritain* (south-south-west). It is surprising that many of these winds were not mentioned by the Groote Eylandters.

Female Figure, Unidentified

Plate 137C, D is a carved wooden figure similar in form to that of the pregnant woman, *Malwulwi* (Pl. 133C, D). I did not collect either the symbolism of the designs or the associated myth.

The Man, Naruwilja

During *bumun* (creation) times there lived at Biobajini, on the Wessel Islands, a fair-skinned *jiritja* man, *Naruwilja*. Not being satisfied with this human existence, he transformed himself into a fish, still bearing the name of *naruwilja*. But as that did not please him he tried the life of an octopus, *mainda*, only to find as little satisfaction in that condition. Finally he changed himself into a flying fox, *matur*, and has remained in that form ever since.

The locality in which the flying foxes live at the Wessel Islands is forbidden to all. Should anyone trespass on their nesting place, and in particular kill a flying fox, the spirit of the creature will change itself into an octopus, enter the body of the miscreant, wrap its tentacles around his heart and kill him.[67]

Plate 136E, F is the carved and painted figure of the transformed man *Naruwilja*. In the right-hand panel of Pl. 136E is the octopus, *mainda*, and in the left, two flying foxes, *matur*. The fish, *naruwilja*, occupies the right-hand panel of Pl. 136F and the octopus, *mainda*, the left-hand panel.

The Macassan Woman, Jubara

Plate 137A, B is the wooden figure of a woman, *Jubara*, who, many years ago, befriended an old aboriginal, *Amalatja*, when he was taken by trepangers to a Macassan village called Jumaina.[68] This figure is the work of *Mungerani*, the son of *Amalatja*.

66. See Groote Eylandt myths of *bara* (north-west) and *mamariga* (south-east) winds, p. 94.

67. Although I did not obtain the specific information, it is likely that this myth is told to the younger men so that they will not eat the flesh of the flying fox which, in many parts of the Northern Territory, is regarded by the aborigines as 'old man tucker'. There are numerous references to the food prohibitions of the young men in the myths of the Liverpool River area.

68. See description of a Yirrkalla painting of Macassan women weaving, by the same artist, Pl. 93A. The Berndts (1949), p. 213, describe a number of non-sacred carved figures of Macassan and *Baijini* people, most of which had been carved by *Mungerani*. Their figure on Pl. 2, Fig. 3, is wearing a similar decoration to *Jubara*.

ARNHEM LAND: ART, MYTH AND SYMBOLISM

7. DECORATED IMPLEMENTS AND WEAPONS

*532 171 The aborigines of Australia gain much pleasure from the painting of their implements and weapons. The painted shields of Queensland[12] and the engraved boomerangs of northern New South Wales[13] are typical examples.

In Arnhem Land, where neither the shield nor the boomerang is used, it is the paddles and the spear-throwers which receive the attention of the artists. [517] Warner[14] records that among the aborigines of Milingimbi, 'although the paints dissolve immediately in water, the natives often paint their paddles for the mere pleasure of decorating them and seeing their beauty.' The natives of Groote Eylandt and Yirrkalla paint both their spear-throwers and their paddles. At the latter place the blades of many of the paddles are covered with engraved or painted designs of totemic significance.

(1) PADDLES FROM YIRRKALLA

The Spirit Men, Maranatuer and Bunjinkum

+773 1776 Two brothers, *Maranatuer* and *Bunjinkum*, noted fishermen and hunters, once lived at Jumbara-pinja, a locality on the Pali-pali River which runs into Arnhem Bay.[15] One day the two *Mokoi* speared a particularly large *dua* turtle called *talibu* (possibly a logger-head),[16] which was so powerful that it towed them far out to sea before they were able to haul the turtle close enough to the canoe to kill it. This accomplished, they paddled back to their camp at Jumbara-pinja, disembowelled the creature and put it on the fire to cook.

Whilst they were waiting, *Maranatuer* looked toward the south and saw the dry-season wind, *timaru*, coming toward them. They were just congratulating [132 221] each other about this, for the period of the *timaru* wind is the season of maturing fruits and underground tubers, when *Bunjinkum*, looking in the opposite direction, saw *Tjambuwal*, of the wet-season wind, *bara*, approaching. Not wishing to be caught between the two winds the brothers hastily ate the turtle, embarked in their canoe and paddled to Jarkala, an island midway between Elcho and the Wessels. Then, hearing that two other *Mokoi*, *Gunbiri* and *Kaiamburo*, friends of theirs, were living on an adjacent island, the brothers left Jarkala and went to stay with them. The four *Mokoi* still live on that island, although no aborigines have ever seen them.

+532 +773 776 Plate 144C, D is the obverse and reverse sides of the paddle.

The central vertical panel on Pl. 144C is the River Pali-pali, at Arnhem Bay, along which the brothers paddled their canoe when they were setting out to catch a turtle. The cross-hatched transverse bands on either side of the river indicate the rocks and sand-banks in its bed.

In the middle of Pl. 144D is the canoe and its occupants, *Maranatuer* being at the top and *Bunjinkum* at the bottom. The dark-coloured bands in panel *a*

12. McConnel (1935), pp. 49-68.
13. Davidson (1937), p. 23.
14. Warner (1937), p. 492.
15. Map, Fig. 57.
16. The logger-head turtle (*Caretta caretta*) is known to have reached the weight of two tons. [136]

[Text continues on p. 450 452]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
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CHAPTER I

THE CULTURAL PATTERN OF NORTH-EASTERN ARNHEM LAND SOCIETY

a. The Geographical Background:

The main centre with which we shall be dealing here is Yirrkalla, in the far north-eastern corner of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The surrounding area is thickly wooded, with jungles and mangrove swamps, fresh water streams and tidal rivers, long beaches broken by sheer cliffs, and occasional islands fairly close to the shore.

Yirrkalla itself takes its name from a fresh water creek that flows into the surf beside a long white curving beach. This creek drains a wide area of lagoon and swamp, its source far back in the hilly inland. Wide grass flats, easily inundated during the monsoonal rains, and dense jungles, lie in the back country not too far from the coast line. At Yirrkalla the Methodist Overseas Mission established a station some eleven years ago: and now a Mission house on a low cliff dominates the beach, where native huts, mostly of cast-off European timber and tin, are arranged in rows. Beyond the Mission house, on a smaller beach, are other huts; and a church, store-house, dispensary and garden complete the settlement.

This Mission station is the centre for natives whose traditional home camps are at Blue Mud Bay, Trial and Caledon Bays and Port Bradshaw to the south, facing the Gulf of Carpentaria, while visitors come from Groote Eylandt, Woodah Island and Rose River. The Yirrkalla local groups belong mainly to Cape Arnhem, Bremer Island, Melville Bay, and the English Company Islands, as well as to Arnhem Bay: but natives from the Wessel and Elcho Islands, Milingimbi in the Crocodile Islands, and from the mainland to the west, do visit this region. Yirrkalla is thus a strategic base for anthropologists and missionaries who desire to contact members of various groups of a more or less similar cultural and linguistic background.

Geographically speaking, the Yirrkalla groups are comparatively isolated, for to-day only the Mission lugger calls at this depôt, with occasional visits by other Europeans who come by boat and 'plane. Yirrkalla is approximately 500 sea-miles east of Darwin, 130 miles

9: Thomson E-5 (1935-1943)1949
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which is very far removed from the general picture of the Australian aborigine. 813 824

As the coast is approached, the country often becomes flat, and takes the form of wide plains through which the rivers flow sluggishly. On their estuarine reaches the rivers break up into innumerable arms, creeks and backwaters which are fringed with dense walls of mangroves. These brackish tidal reaches intersect the coastal plains, which are periodically flooded, becoming shallow lagoons which soon dry up, and leave miles of bare mud. This dries out and cracks so that it presents a tessellated appearance, and is often encrusted with deposits of salt. The estuarine reaches, tidal arms, and flood plains, yield very large quantities of food—chief of which are fish, for the capture of which many very specialised methods have been developed in Arnhem Land. Shellfish (*maipal*), including *laitjin*, (the wood-boring shipworm, *Teredo*) are also obtained in quantity in the mangrove zone. The shellfish are gathered at low water and *Teredo* are extracted from sodden logs uncovered at low tide, by splitting these with an axe and pulling them out by hand. 133 136 226

There are two well-defined seasons in Arnhem Land, the wet, or north-west monsoon, and the dry or south-east season. The "wet" extends from about December to March or April, when the wind is generally in the north-west quarter. During this period most of the annual rainfall—about 40 inches—occurs. The "dry" season extends from about April to November. At this season little rain falls except in far North-eastern Arnhem Land and for much of this period the wind blows steadily from the south-east. 132

This division of the year into two strongly-contrasted seasons has an important influence not only on the food supply of the people but also on their movements and occu- 221 805 813

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
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CHAPTER TWO

Exploring

133 It has been called wildest Arnhem Land, and thousands of square miles of it have never been seen by civilized man. For months we combed its coastline, creeks, and valleys, searching for a site for the new station, but strange as it may seem, a suitable site was not discovered, although we had three hundred miles of coastline from which to choose. For that matter, I have never seen any site in Arnhem Land providing all the essentials for a self-supporting community. At least one requirement was always missing. When a rare pocket of rich jungle soil with palms, ferns, tangled vines, and tall shady trees was found, then the jungle was low-lying and useless as a building site. If an anchorage, where fresh water and building areas were ideal, then not a square foot of good soil was to be seen.

Everything of value in the country has been eroded and washed into swamps or out to sea. That over thirty thousand square miles of it can be so desperately poor, and yet have an [138] annual rainfall of from forty to seventy inches, puts the land in a class by itself. Sand-ridges, mangrove-swamps, and laterite headlands make it a monotonous coastline. Most swamps are impenetrable because of useless mangrove [136] jungles, sheltering crocodiles, crabs, and flying foxes. Tree-climbing fish (*Periopthalmus*) swarm in salt-water jungles, and at the first sight of danger hop from the water to the roots and low branches of trees. Gravel headlands extend inland to low hills devoid of useful timber and grass. High mountains there are none, but in central Arnhem Land a sandstone plateau is lacerated by countless abysmal

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
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water-worn canyons—a wild, desolate region where only goannas find enough to eat and white cockatoos screech through the gorges.

Nevertheless, I found it fascinating to fly over this country —no one would toil through swamps and humid jungles if it were possible to fly over them in the coolness and comfort of a plane. Arnhem Bay is typical coastal country, low-lying and well-nigh impenetrable, but during the war years I grew accustomed to looking at it from R.A.A.F. Catalinas and watching its panorama unfold in a succession of meandering grass-choked creeks and swamps, with a narrow ribbon of jungle dividing them from the waters of the bay. White cockatoos circled over black clumps of jungle, white ibises fished in the shallow swamps, and egrets waded on the mudflats and made it appear like a garden of marguerites waving in the breeze.

Even the weather is surprising, and the climate accounts for the poverty of the country. Seven or eight months of the year are cool; that is when the dry, south-east monsoon blows in from the Pacific. Wind and warm sun parch the ground and bush fires rage over the hills and sandy valleys, so that for weeks the sky is hidden in smoke haze and the setting sun is a blood-red ball. Yulengor start fires when hunting and cannot pass dry grass without firing it. It is a common practice for them to strip five or six feet of stringy bark from a tree, twist it into a stiff length, light one end and carry it like a walking stick, stabbing the fiery end into dry grass by the side of the track.

By October the winds are calm, humus has been licked up by the fires, a burning sun completes the destruction, and the country is a barren ash-heap. December brings a change in the wind and, heavily laden with moisture, it blows in from the north-west, flooding the country with torrential rain of from forty to seventy inches. Its immediate effect on dried-out Arnhem Land is devastating, as loose soil, sand, ash, and

134 132 humus are swept into the swamps or out to sea. The residue from this fierce erosion is the typical clay, gravel, and stone of Arnhem Land. Nevertheless, with the first cloudbursts, the harassed country makes an astounding recovery. In an 137 136 incredibly short time a thick growth of high coarse grass covers the rocky hills and sandy valleys, yams spring to life on gravel slopes, and animal and bird life is rejuvenated; red kangaroos, agile wallabies, opossums, mice, snakes, goannas, emus, jungle fowls, ducks, geese, spoonbills, herons, brolgas, and many more in kind grow fat and lazy from the 132 lavish hand of nature. But the vicious circle is not to be avoided. Winds swing back to the south-east and the nightmare of poverty again creeps over the land.

123 Exploring in the north-east brought us into contact with most of the scattered hordes so frequently referred to as the 'Killers of Arnhem Land'. In early September we were in the English Company's Islands, with the crew on the look-out for Yulengor; and when they saw a thin column of smoke on a beach, conjecture was rife as to who was in the camp. A dozen men and boys paddled out in their big dug-out canoes and came aboard somewhat diffidently. However, they were soon squatting round the hatch exchanging news with the crew, all the time passing the one [276] and only bush pipe backwards and forwards and drawing deeply the first tobacco smoke they had tasted for months. Most of them were strong and well developed, with bushy hair, but not too clean. As a concession to the white man [291] they had donned strips of bark on string waistbands. They were reserved, but interested in all we did, and gladly accepted a couple of tomahawks, wire for fish-spears, and fish-hooks.

628 After the visitors had cast-off in their canoes, a crew-boy 684 mentioned that our visitors had just returned from killing a 682 man in revenge for the death of another in the hills behind our anchorage. It was a long story of intrigue and murder,